

Employee Spotlight: Laura McClellan

August 23, 2016



Lending a helping hammer

Under a soaring blue African sky, Laura McClellan of the Manager of Functions division office (MOF-DO) stood with other Habitat for Humanity volunteers in a line like a bucket brigade, passing along cement blocks to the skilled local masons raising the walls of a new house. When she could spare a moment, Laura would soak up the view of backcountry Lesotho, a nation landlocked by South Africa. Mesas and canyons stretched into the distance much like they do at home in New Mexico or southern Utah, Laura thought. These stark highlands were a beautiful place to be a tourist, an even better place to lend a helping hand to someone who really needed it.

Laura McClellan travelled to the Ha-Mokuba village in Lesotho to help build a new home for the Lecheko family.

Habitat for Humanity is an American-based nonprofit devoted to building affordable housing in partnership with people in need in the United States and around the world.

“Knowing that people have a lot of needs—many are in extreme poverty and lack food, housing, education, all that—Habitat for Humanity stresses that the first thing that helps is housing, because it creates stability,” Laura says. “Then you can worry about where your next meal is coming from, health, and education.”

This time it was the Lecheko family of Ha-Mokuba village who needed help. Their crumbling hut of mud and stone had caved in while they slept—a wardrobe spared them by deflecting the avalanche of debris. Now they couldn’t afford to rebuild. Laura and her husband Ken McClellan of the Materials Science in Radiation & Dynamics Extremes group (MST-8), joined the Habitat for Humanity Lesotho Global Village Team to support the Orphaned and Vulnerable Children Project for a week to work on the Lecheko home. So did Laura’s former co-worker, Nick Salazar of Gas Transfer Systems (Q-7), and his wife, Janice Salazar of DESHF-Weapons Facilities Operations (DESHF-WFO).

The Lecheko family: “Uncle” Motlalepula, Matimello, Ts’epang, and Mapaseka.

Addressing a world of needs

The Africa trip wasn’t Laura’s first experience with Habitat for Humanity. In 2012 in the wake of the 2010 earthquake disaster in Haiti, she helped put up houses on a Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter Work Project, when she ambushed the former president—“my role model,” she says—to ask for his autograph.

Ken and Laura McClellan wear the Lesotho hats that were made for them as gifts, with members of the Lecheko family.

Closer to home, working extensively with Habitat for Humanity of Española Valley & Los Alamos, Laura has helped build a couple of houses and worked on renovating several more through a new program she helped kick-start with a partnership between Habitat and her church, Bethlehem Evangelical Lutheran Church in Los Alamos. Called Building Kindness, it offered basic renovation and repair work.

“We were building ramps for handicap access, shoring up floors that were caving in, repairing roofs, putting on a new front door,” she says. She then helped transition Building Kindness into a free-standing program called Somos Amigos.

The Habitat-related work harmonizes with another volunteer project close to Laura’s heart, though at first it seems unrelated: the Los Alamos Faith & Science Forum. The forum, which has run three consecutive summers since 2014 plus one winter session in 2015-2016, taps local speakers and brings in an invited speaker each summer to spark free-flowing discussions on the intersection of faith and science.

Matimello Lecheko in her new kitchen.

“We just formed a 501(c)(3) (nonprofit under IRS tax code) for the Forum,” she says. “Now we’re finalizing our membership rules, which we will announce soon. We have a lot of ideas about where we might go in the future. The highlight of our summer sessions are the small-group discussions where we stress trying on a new idea and walking in someone else’s shoes to promote better understanding and discussions.” Like Habitat, the forum gives Laura a way to help others and to learn something new about new places, new people—and herself. “Both feed my desire to address needs in the world,” she says.

The Lechekos relax in front of their new home.

Neighbors pitch in

During Laura's week in Ha-Mokuba, the locals all pitched in. A caring, deft neighbor named Abennie Masopa wandered in—"from somewhere, who knows where?" she says—to lend his talents to the wall building. Laura and Jim would spend the better part of one day helping him dig a deep latrine. Meanwhile, to provide water for mixing mortar, women and children filled jugs at a pond, balanced them on their heads, and trekked across the village to the job site.

When the house was finished—the walls were up when the Global Village Team departed at week's end—grandmother Matimello Lecheko, her son, her orphaned sixteen-year-old granddaughter, and her orphaned fourteen-year-old grandson would sleep in a warm, comfortable new house, snug against the freezing nights of winter in the Lesotho highlands.

The Lecheko home.

Laura McClellan is a process improvement specialist in the Manager of Functions division office.

Resources

- Learn more about [Habitat for Humanity](#) and how the [Jimmy & Rosalynn Carter Work Project](#) builds homes around the world.
 - Visit [Lesotho Global Village Team](#), Laura McClellan's blog, to read about her home-building adventure with her husband Ken McClellan in Lesotho.
 - The [Los Alamos Faith & Science Forum](#) has completed its Summer 2016 series of talks and discussions but will soon be planning for next year.
 - [Somos Amigos](#) is currently reorganizing to continue its mission of helping needy families with home repairs in the Española-Los Alamos area.
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